

Sacred Kink – Exploring BDSM as Lived Religion

If you look it up on the internet you will find that BDSM stands for Bondage, Domination (or possibly Discipline), Submission (or possibly Sadism, or possibly Slavery, or possibly Service) and Masochism (or possibly Mastery). If you ask people who self-identify as practitioners of BDSM you will find that they know these various forms of acronym and, after telling you one, many of them will then proceed to explain why looking at the term in this way is unhelpful in understanding what it is people actually do under that title. I would like to propose that we forget the acronym and view BDSM instead as a term in its own right. As one of my participants proposed let us think of it instead as *“that broad, all-encompassing rainbow term to cover anything that people feel is beyond vanilla”* (Damien), as a *“collective noun for them all...a collection of people with their kinks”* (poppy).

Understood this way we can view it as an umbrella under which huddle a broad and diverse range of concepts, phenomena, artefacts, communities and behaviours. The people beneath that umbrella do not all share a common understanding of its purpose, or of what the activities they do under there are ‘really’ all about; some will reflect deeply on that issue, while for others it is wholly unimportant. The activities on which they reflect (or don’t) also vary in many ways; for some the relevant activity takes place within a dedicated space, set up and equipped for that purpose while for others what they do is what they do and location or equipment is incidental. Some people do all the things that may be commonly regarded as being under that umbrella, some people only one and some create their own things to add to the list of possibilities. There are people who routinely practice in a particular way, and people who simply mark particular occasions or utilise a practice as a means of engaging with a community. Some may choose to create a sharp and clear line between what is under the umbrella and what is outside of it, but others do not. In short, when the breadth and variety of things which people choose to place under that umbrella is considered there seems little to unite them into a single category beyond the fact that someone, somewhere has placed it into the bracket. At this point it occurs to me that all I have just said is also true of the umbrella term of ‘religion’, which is a complex and multivalent concept, but which is often discussed as an obvious and clearly delineated category with clear and impermeable edges. I am doubtful whether any such pristine categories exist in relation to human activities, but whether they do or not, neither religion nor BDSM offer us an example of one. It is not my intention to use this similarity-in-ambiguity to simply collapse one into the other, rather to note that if both are fuzzy categories, subject to different constructions by those who identify with them, then the possibility both of overlap and fusion between the two clearly exists. It also seems likely that the tools useful for studying one may

be similarly useful in understanding the other and my research explores the idea of BDSM as a religious practice, using an approach called lived religion.

In recent years all sorts of activities not associated with traditional ideas about religion have been studied within the discipline of religious studies; one example is Taylor's (2007) study of surfing as an aquatic nature religion. He used what he describes as "the lenses typically deployed by scholars of religion" (p.926) to present surfing as a new form of religion "in which a specific sensual practice constitutes its sacred centre" (p.923). These lenses include elements such as an origin myth, ritual elements, and a global community with shared values and a distinctive language. Doubtless all of these elements could be identified in relation to BDSM, and practitioners, who have never previously thought of their engagement in the practice as religious, might thereby "recognise themselves, and their subculture" (p.939) in the analysis. However the framework of institutional religion, and especially the emphasis on religion as synonymous with systems of belief does not offer a complete picture of religion.

I do not intend to try to locate a unified system of belief among practitioners of BDSM. Instead by looking at the practice, at what it is and what it does and what it is like to do it, I aim to identify the practice of BDSM with a broader concept of religion. This yields some of the same ideas as the "lenses" with which Taylor was working, but it reaches them from a different direction; instead of finding aspects of BDSM which could be described in religious terms and so imposing that meaning, I have followed McGuire's (2008) suggestion that to understand religion we should avoid creating images of what we think it is, or ought to be, and instead consider what people actually do and how they understand it. This opens the study of religion beyond the conceptual bundles of belief, practice, text, doctrine etc. endorsed by named institutions and enables us to move away from the idea that people have 'a religion' towards a more abstract concept of 'religion' or 'the religious' as an element which is shaped to and by individual lives. I suggest that religion is *made* by real people in real situations, in all of the "places where humans make something of the worlds they have found themselves thrown into" (Orsi, 1997 p.7). It does not need to be explicitly named 'religion' to do the things religion does; to enable people to "share, enact, adapt, create and combine the stories out of which they live" (McGuire, 2008 p.99), and to create meaning by "making the invisible visible, ...concretising the order of the universe, the nature of human life...and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority itself...in order to render them visible and tangible" (Orsi, 2005 p.73-74).

To view religion in this way is to view it as lived. It is to recognise that religion cannot be separated from the material situation in which it arises and/or to which it responds; that it is not exclusively

found in designated religious spaces and that it is intimately concerned with relationship, with embodied practice and the narratives used to make sense of these. Lived religion is thus concerned with religion as an active project, through which people address their deepest concerns. I suggest that BDSM offers one means of pursuing such a project, wherever individual practitioners locate themselves in regard to terms such as 'religious', 'spiritual' or 'secular'.

It is perhaps worth inserting a note here with regard to the use of spiritual as an alternative to religion, since to refer to highly individualised activities as religion when the person carrying them out does not use this label may require some justification. The label 'spiritual but not religious' is commonly used to separate the practices of individuals within a religious tradition from the practices of those who are not, or to describe people who consciously reject the religious mainstream and institutional religion. Taken at face value this could place the study of any practice carried out by a person outside defined religious traditions into a separate realm of study, which in the present context this would imply the need to make sharp distinctions between people who practice BDSM as a personal aspect of their officially recognised religion, people who find BDSM meaningful or transformative but who do not refer to it in spiritual terms, and people who practice explicitly labelled "sacred kink" (Harrington, 2009). As Streib and Hood (2011) correctly conclude the concepts of 'spirituality' and 'religion' are so closely related that it is almost nonsensical to regard them as separate areas for study'. Religion is sufficient as an etic term, but spirituality retains importance as an emic term, referring to a person's "privatised individualised and experience-oriented religiosity" (p.442). This view allows us to honour an individual's own understanding of their practice, while rendering the artificial distinction of different approaches to the same activity unnecessary, and I therefore regard all the above possibilities as different forms of lived religion.

While individual understanding of religion and spirituality is of interest, and consideration of the concepts did form part of my conversations with participants, the concept of lived religion allows me to look beyond these labels to consider a range of possible avenues through which religion and BDSM might intersect. The point at which I have chosen to start is the experience of 'doing' BDSM. Experience is a problematic concept, given that we are all experiencing all of the time. When we choose to designate a particular happening as 'An Experience' what we appear to mean is an occasion when something out of the ordinary occurred, disrupting the normal flow of our experiencing and focussing our attention on particular elements of it. As I discussed experiences of BDSM with my participants it became clear that occasions of BDSM play (scenes) were regarded as particular examples of the bubbles of Experience that can occur within that stream, while a lifestyle D/s dynamic and personal BDSM identity were among the many flows which feed the constant

stream of experiencing. All of my participants regarded BDSM as an aspect of their identity, and this remains true even in situations where that aspect is hidden from others, so speaking of 'play' (or 'discipline', in the context of a lifestyle relationship) refers to particular occasions during which the BDSM aspects of the person or relationship can become more explicit rather than being internal. During play these aspects are brought into the foreground for a period of time, and then, later, returned to the stream. This offers an opportunity to draw a metaphorical line (albeit a fuzzy one) around that Experience, which provides a chance to examine whether and how it differs from the general flow of the stream, what it means to the people involved and how it relates to the rest of their lives.

The analysis of my participant interviews is at an early stage, but a range of thematic strands have already emerged which speak to the role of BDSM in personal meaning-making and orientation within the world. However it seems appropriate to begin with the nature of the play experience. 'Experience' is an important concept within religious studies, where it is commonly understood as referring to mystical or transcendent experiences. These terms are contested and used in different ways in religious contexts. However they have been used by studies of BDSM to suggest one possible means by which practitioners understand their activity (Taylor and Ussher, 2001) and also to suggest that BDSM functions as a "spiritual exercise" for some (Beckmann, 2009 p.176). Beckmann's study identified a range of features which characterise "transcendental experiences" (p.176) created by BDSM. These include altered perception, loss of a sense of time, a dream-like quality and a different or unusual flow of memory in relation to the experience. My participants referred to all of these elements, but as aspects of any successful play rather than as signifying extraordinary events beyond the usual quality of experience within a play-space. It is these elements which create the bubble in the stream of experiencing which becomes the particular Experience of 'a scene'.

"It's kind of...if you stare at a candle in a dimly lit room you become aware of everything darkening down, and it's just the light of the candle. That's all, everything else will dim. And there's an essence of that, the room may disappear, background noise can fade away..... I've completely lost that [sense of time passing]. What feels like five minutes could be an hour and vice versa...." (Damien).

"Time passing especially [goes away]....but also any kind of awareness of my image and environment and all that kind of thing, becomes very small" (Ivy).

"I'm actually more conscious of sensations, smells, feelings and the other person and what I am but again I'm not conscious of my surroundings or my body. So I am going into a different space" (Cee).

It seems clear that there is an altered consciousness inherent within play, with many individuals describing the play-space as a bubble or a zone, outside the normal stream of consciousness and the everyday world; reference to a “different world”, a new or different place or a “magic space” was also common. This idea of a new place outside or apart from the ordinary world was common regardless of the role taken in the play although other qualities were distinct. The space is centred upon, or formed around, the person taking the bottom role - Cee described it as “*feeding on*” them – and the bottom is less likely to be aware of the edges of the space or of other people trespassing into it than the Top. The person bottoming is more likely to lose their sense of self, or to experience a blurring of sensations that are normally distinct, while the person in the Top role has a heightened awareness of things happening within the play-space, and a feeling of greater control or awareness of themselves and of their partner’s reactions and responses. Despite these differences in the nature of the experience it is strongly felt that both parties are involved in making the space, and it is somewhere they go together.

Within this different world different levels of altered consciousness are available. This is usually talked of in terms of intensity, with a peak of ‘sub-space’ or ‘Top/Dom-space’. These terms are understood in different ways, but they are more likely to be labelled by practitioners as altered consciousness than the general experience of play and for this reason I believe it is these peaks of intensity that Beckmann labels as “transcendental”. This is problematic though because some participants refer to all successful play in terms of a scale of ‘more’ or ‘less’ into “spacey” than other times - as poppy mused “*I think on balance if it was a ... good scene then I would have been spacey. But how spacey....?*” – while others use it to refer only to occasional extremes. Cate described sub-space as “*a garden*” to which she is transported when she reaches that peak, but her descriptions of play where she did not “space” are in much the same terms as others describe their sub-space experiences. For most people the experience of a scene becomes sub-space when elements like a total loss of self or control over one’s body occur, physical sensations and reactions are transformed, speech may become impossible or nonsensical and understanding of spatial orientation can be distorted. Several people liken it to a drug-induced trance, and describe people in it as looking like they have passed out, or as being wholly unable to care for themselves. These features were also identified by Beckmann as characteristic of transcendental states, which may be why she concluded that altered consciousness is less accessible to people taking the Top role. However Top-space is described by many as a possible experience, albeit consisting of different qualities to sub-space. Damien described the feeling of Topping a successful scene as being “*Godlike*”, and understood Top-space to be “*the feeling that when things are flowing that it’s just sort of...the moment when you don’t have to think any more, it just seems to occur*”. For Barry it was focussed more on the euphoria

that comes in the aftermath of a successful scene and Cee felt that she went to sub-space with her partner, so that for her Top-space was a sharing of their experience combined with the awareness of her power in creating it. However the terms are understood these peak states are not generally viewed as an aim of play (although some bottoms suggested they need a level of 'spacey-ness' to cope with certain types of pain). The attitude is more *"if it happens it happens"* (Ivy), and some people prefer to avoid it entirely – Colin says, *"I don't think personally that I've ever been [to sub-space]. I've certainly taken ladies there, and they are very, very vulnerable when they're there...I don't know that I want to lose control that much."*

Another idea commonly associated with the concept of religious experience is that of transformation. Many of my participants accepted the idea that BDSM could change them, and had done so, but it was rarely a single scene which caused this. For most it was gradual change as the result of many different BDSM encounters rather than the result of a single intense scene. Most seem to agree with Ivy's summary : *"I've certainly had scenes where I've come out feeling bigger and more capable and that kind of thing.... I don't think it lasts at the level that it is, but I think it's kind of an iterative thing."*

It may be here that a difference can be found between scenes explicitly identified as spiritual or sacred kink and scenes which are not. Deliberately spiritual scenes might incorporate rituals designed and intended to be transformative. Javelin describes a ritual of spiritually reclaiming the hermaphrodite body which was surgically altered at birth to appear male; this ritual enabled Javelin to properly integrate the female elements of Javelin's personality. Stoneyface described blood-letting and hook-suspension rituals which were both a physical embracing of his Shamanic path and a dramatic claiming of his right to belong to "his people". For people without this explicit framework however the language tends to be that of a gradual and extended journey or exploration rather than a single, contained passage from one state to another. This may not fit with the view of religious experience as a dramatic "white hot" encounter with divinity (Taylor, 2003 p.19), after which everything is changed, but it is consistent with the idea of religion as lived and involved in the creation of personal story. BDSM also allows for people to build upon the initial experience, creating a new "momentary sense of wow!" (Taylor, 2003 p.116) as a foundation for new reflections and understandings of self, other and the world.

Much dialogue about both the experience and the personal importance of BDSM focussed on words like 'trust', 'honesty' and 'communication'. Many people feel that they achieve a degree of trust and knowledge of the people they play with which would be significantly harder, if not impossible, for a non-Scene couple to achieve. Connection is created and strengthened through play, although it

requires more than just a willingness on both sides to play together: *"I guess that [connection] is what you make while you're playing. But you can't make it without, you have to share a wavelength ... Like a hook and eye? I've got one part, and it either fits with a partner or it doesn't. But if it doesn't I don't think you can make it. It's there or it isn't, and if it isn't you can have kinky sex but you can't have BDSM"* (pussikin).

Ideas of trust and connection also extend beyond play-partners to the wider community. Almost everyone I spoke with felt that there is a community, which they are part of. It has shared values of tolerance and mutual respect which operate as ideals (although there are individuals who don't act according to them). The idea that play should be "safe, sane and consensual" is important, although there is a section of the community who feel that 'safe' and 'sane' are unhelpful or loaded terms. 'Risk aware' may be substituted for 'safe' and the idea that the sanity of the activity needs to be made explicit might be rejected, on the basis that to do so implicitly accepts an obvious connection between BDSM type activity and insanity or criminal behaviour. However the values which underlie all these terms remain the same – parties should consent to do what they do with the full knowledge of what it is. This is exemplified with the safe-word concept, which for most equates to a withdrawal of consent if it is used. The importance of this is such that many said they would intervene in a club or party if they heard someone safe-word and the scene did not stop immediately. This also extends beyond the world of public play-spaces; Rosie described how when she told a friend that her safe-word had been ignored during a private scene the word spread through the local community and the individual concerned was effectively shunned, to the point where they no longer appeared at munches or local events. Other participants had third-party anecdotes of a similar nature. My membership of the community and the corresponding assumption that we therefore shared an understanding of these values was a contributing factor in many peoples decision to talk to me.

The importance of relationship also featured in discussions about religion and spirituality. Participants not only felt that spirituality might be found in the connections people make with one another but also more broadly in *"feeling interconnected with things that everything is actually joined together"* (Damien). Paolo, a *"Buddhist, if I'm anything"*, linked the idea of interconnection specifically with his BDSM practice, although he did not consider that he practiced spiritual kink in a conscious way. He said, *"accepting the fact that we're all part of the same thing is spiritual, and letting nature and letting things come into my life[is spiritual]...the BDSM scene has been part of this"*. People also associated morals and the values which inform how we treat others with religious rules and codes of conduct. Most felt that these codes were inadequate or too rigid (in the same way that they rejected the idea of a single right way to do BDSM) but they often drew a clear link

between how they chose to behave and ideas of religion and spirituality as they relate to themselves.

All participants felt that their BDSM was a meaningful activity, greater or other than the sum of its parts, or not reducible to being 'about' any one thing. This idea of gestalt seems to me an important factor in what practices may come to form part of an individual's lived religion; a named organised religion is not just a set of beliefs, although this may be part of it, neither is it just practices, or liturgy. It is not just anything, there is always something else to be considered. A religion to which people are attached is a place where different elements have combined in a way which resonates for that person on a wavelength that nothing else speaks too. This can happen with things outside the boundaries of named religion as well, creating that same more-than- or other-than-. Creating a "Thirdspace" (Soja, 1996), a lived space that is both distinct from perception and conception, and which encompasses both of them, a space that is "simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...)" (p.11). In this space the gestalt activity – kink of various kinds for my participants but who knows for others? – is neither a leisure activity or a religious ritual (in the prescribed sense of an established religious tradition) it is neither, or perhaps it is both. The nature of this gestalt for my participants was often put into terms of exploring and understanding the self and relationship to others - as Nomad puts it *"it's a tool for exploring parts of yourself that you have suppressed. It's a tool for pleasure. It's... a tool for learning.....what you are, who you are."* Others talked of release, a temporary setting down of burdens or expectations, or of claiming or realising something. Another common strand was balancing or connecting the mental with the physical, to exist fully 'in the moment', and some participants tied several of these strands together.

Perhaps importantly this self-exploration is not purely about achievement, overcoming setbacks, triumphing over adversity, as might be expected in the contemporary world; BDSM enables the exploration of weakness, of role reversal, of pain and humiliation or degradation as experiences in themselves rather than things to be overcome. These are areas of deep concern, which must be engaged with if one is to make sense of the world. More than this, by seeking to experience these things as they are practitioners can begin move past some of the unhelpful binaries and absolutes which categorise much modern thinking about these areas.

Some people also spoke about the ability of BDSM to embrace contradiction, ambiguity and paradox, to be, as Ivy put it, *"simultaneously meaningful and completely ridiculous!"* Kraemer (2014) says that these "positive, ecstatic, boundary-blurring experiences raise one's tolerance for the ungraspable and uncategorisable and so potentially permit us to re-examine our assumptions [about the world]" (p.98). In this way BDSM makes an abstract knowledge of the complexity of things and

the inadequacy of the labels we choose to describe them into a lived reality. The community has its own jargon, and many heated discussions around the inadequacy of its own self-created labels, but when the focus is on the experiences shared within it is clear that many people feel this potential. Each of the strands considered above can be found within activities and communities more universally agreed to be religious than the BDSM community. The presence of these things in a BDSM context does not automatically render BDSM religious any more than a group meeting in a church building is automatically a religious event. I cannot offer a single factor sufficient in itself to define all religion, but I suggest that a given practice is made religious by the ways it is woven into individual lives. This could be through its creating of discrete powerful experiences or through its ability to cast a different light on other elements in the tapestry, creating a new lustre. In either case the element of gestalt is present, attached to an apparently ordinary thread as it is woven into the pattern and giving it a sheen that signals there is more to it than its practical place in the tapestry's design. Since BDSM is a practice which can gain such a lustre, both through the single powerful experience and through its influence on the day-to-day existence of practitioners it is my view that it can be regarded as a lived religious practice. It is also interesting to note that while my participants encompassed between them the full range of attitudes to the terms religion and spirituality – from accepting both to accepting neither – none of them rejected outright the idea that BDSM is more or other than sex, physical pleasure or other simple, single-focus explanations and all felt that it added a dimension of fulfilment to their life which could not be easily explained. Given this the idea of lived religion was generally grasped with interest, and although most people felt they would need to spend time thinking more about whether they were prepared to apply that precise term to their own practice Ivy's view sums up a general attitude – *"I don't think that [institutional] religion makes me able to inhabit my world any better whereas I think BDSM perhaps does"*.

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